844

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Current
Policy
No. 844

A Democratic Vision of Security

United States Department of State
Bureau of Public Affairs
Washington, D.C.

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JUL 14 1986

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Following is an address by Elliott Abrams, Assistant Secretary for Inter-American Affairs, before the Inter-American Defense College, Washington, D.C., June 13, 1986.

Thank you for inviting me to address this 25th commencement of this institution, which has rendered outstanding service in support of military professionalism and inter-American cooperation.

The New Era of Democracy

We live in an extraordinary period. Democracy is on the rise in our hemisphere. It is transforming political and social conditions. The stereotype of the Americas as a hemisphere of military dictatorships is obsolete.

The democratic tide is very strong. Ten years ago, only 30% of Latin Americans lived in countries whose governments were democratic; today, 90% live in countries whose governments honor democratic practices. Nor is this change the result of exhortations from the United States. It is the product of a uniquely Latin American experience. The past 40 years of economic and political ups and downs have given new force to aspirations for freedom, development, and national dignity. Latin America finally has a real opportunity to escape the classic cycle of unstable alternation between civilian governments that lack the authority to govern and military governments that lack the legitimacy to last.

This historic development has far-reaching implications, and we must all adapt to its new realities. For the United States, we welcome the trend to democratic government. We see in it a basis for both greater security and greater well-being. And we believe that democracy can both cause improved cooperation among our governments and be strengthened by cooperation among us. We are, therefore, adapting our actions and our programs to support democratic forces and institutions whenever we are in a position to do so.

Democracy and the Military

For those of you who will now return to places of leadership in the military services of Latin America, there will be adjustments, too. Gone are the days when the coup d'etat was an option that could be exercised without local or international costs by military leaders arrogating to themselves the right to decide for their nation.

Your generation must be a generation of pioneers. You are now the guardians of the new democracies. Your highest calling must be not to replace failed regimes but to protect successful democracies. You must succeed in the task of forging a new vision of security in which democracy is the cornerstone, not a luxury; where free and open political competition is an ally, not an impediment to peace and development.

Your success or your failure will matter to all of us. No institutions are more important to the protection of democracy than the ones you represent as officers from the armed forces of 16 different countries of the Americas.

Dangers

There are many dangers to security in the hemisphere today. The emergence of illegal drug production and trafficking on a massive scale is rapidly becoming a regionwide menace. The *narcotraficantes* threaten public order through corruption and violence even when they are not explicitly tied to terrorists and other subversives with political objectives. And their growing power and the corruption it breeds endangers not only civilian institutions but *yours*. You and your fellow military officers must guard your institution against this cancer. You must be relentless in fighting the traffickers: your institutions, your honor, and the freedom of your societies are at stake.

Another danger is the use of democracy as a screen behind which to protect privilege and the power of minorities. The parading of democratic forms without their substance can take many guises. Elections might be held, but, without genuine competition, the results are a foregone conclusion. Assemblies and legislatures might meet but have no real power. Constitutions might be written but never be respected.

In 1974 the Catholic bishops of Nicaragua gave a name to this kind of abuse. When Anastasio Somoza manipulated the constitution and the laws of Nicaragua to guarantee his reelection, the bishops called his actions a form of

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"legal war." When the law is used to oppress, the abuse serves only the enemies of democracy.

In Nicaragua, the natural inheritors are the Marxist-Leninists. Today, the Sandinistas cynically repeat the charade: they clothe their new dictatorship in elections, draft constitutions, and other ostensibly democratic trappings while moving steadily toward totalitarianism. But there are also major differences with the past: their repression is worse and more pervasive. As communists, the Sandinistas seek not merely dictatorial power but the complete remaking of the social order. Their ideology is also expansionist, and they operate as an instrument of Soviet power. This creates new dangers for the hemisphere.

One of these dangers is terrorism and subversion. The guerrillas in El Salvador and their Nicaraguan and Cuban sponsors have abandoned politics for armed struggle. They and others like them believe their swords will prove mightier than the pens wielded by the voters. Together, we can prove them wrong. We can use the pen to craft laws and practices that will eliminate the grounds on which they attack us. And we must stop with the sword those who do attack with the sword.

And as we respond, we must be careful not to fall into the trap of new extremisms, whether of the left or the right. Overreaction will only discredit us. We must guard against fighting the enemy indiscriminately with an excess of zeal or an excess of force. To lose sight of the values we defend is to help our enemies.

Still other dangers to democracy come from irresponsibility and impatience. Economic growth and responsible democratic government are *not* easy. It takes time to produce economic growth that will benefit the society as a whole. It takes time for democracy to establish its roots and for all citizens to understand the benefits that will accrue from supporting and participating in the democratic system. And it takes time to develop the solidarity necessary to ensure long-term international cooperation and mutual assistance among democrats.

So your duty is to be patient, to help preserve public order as requested by constitutional authorities, and to administer your own institutions so as to contribute to citizen confidence in the fairness and effectiveness of public administration. We in the United States have a similar duty: we must remind ourselves that complicated development and security problems require long-term solutions that do not come overnight. We must be persistent.

There is one final danger I want to mention. It is the vulnerability created by distrust and even contempt among the military toward civilians and among civilians toward you. A democratic strategy of national security requires the overcoming of traditional antimilitary and anticivilian attitudes. Too often civilians and military travel in different circles and lack extensive cross-communication and awareness of each other's concerns. The supremacy of constitutional authorities must be accompanied by mutual trust and close cooperation. A stable democratic system requires increased contact and communication within the nation as well as with other democracies.

Responding to These Challenges

The United States and Latin America share a common interest in the defense of democracy. The Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance affirms as a manifest truth that "...peace is grounded on...the international recognition and protection of human rights... and on the effectiveness of democracy for the international realization of justice and security."

But while we have a common purpose, the requirements of national security differ from state to state. We in the United States must, above all, meet the threat of Soviet military power to global peace and development. You in Latin America also face external enemies, but they are often enemies who fight you from within, using communist subversion, terrorism, or narcotics production and trafficking.

How you respond to the immediate and direct threats of drugs, terrorism, and subversion will determine the future of your institutions and the survival of democracy for your generation. In fact, the success of democracy, the defense of the nation's honor, stability, and economic progress will, in large measure, depend on your ability to deal with these particular dimensions of security. Your skill will be measured by your contributions to saving your countrymen from these threats.

These are awesome challenges. They will require great professionalism. And that, in turn, will require new equipment, better intelligence, and the training and education to use both effectively. Military training must be as high a priority for you as it is for us. I hope you will all pass on to your fellow officers at home as much as possible of the knowledge you have gained while you have been in Washington.

In strengthening military institutions, we must take care not to create new threats to democratic rule. By necessity, your role becomes a large one when you are called upon to fight guerrillas, terrorists, and drug traffickers. These tasks require sizable forces with substantial resources. But the very enlargement of military forces to protect democratic institutions can threaten those very institutions when the military dwarfs civilian institutions and assumes some of their functions.

This paradox poses a danger that we must all guard against. It is a danger that has been averted in Honduras and El Salvador. In both these countries, major threats to democracy forced an expansion of military size, power, and capabilities. Yet, in both cases, military expansion has not led to an erosion of civilian authority. In both countries, the rule of law, respect for institutionalism, effective civil-military coordination, and the capacity for international cooperation have been strengthened.

Events in Central America have demonstrated that, just as democracy must be defended, so also must dictatorship, injustice, or intolerance be unhesitatingly opposed. Abusers of human rights cannot claim that they are acting in the name of "democracy." Their actions only help the violent and totalitarian left, the true enemies of democracy. Their values are not our values. Their means leave us less secure.

Political authorities have a special obligation, too. It is to fight subversion by attacking the conditions that give the enemies of democracy a fertile environment in which to gain adherents. We must not allow the communists to be the only party that approaches poor *campesinos* with a message of concern and respect. Neglect must be replaced with policies that extend the benefits of democracy to all citizens.

In this sense, the rise of democracy in the hemisphere satisfies the imperatives of a comprehensive security policy. We will find security in the construction of open, inclusive, and democratic political orders.

Conclusion: A New Vocation

So, this is a historic moment, a moment that calls for new roles, based in a new democratic vocation. It is a moment that you can seize by acting in the best tra-

ditions of your institutions—and, in doing so, preserve your integrity, serve the people, and protect their freedom.

Twenty-five years ago, when the Alliance for Progress was first launched, the entire hemisphere seemed to discover that there could be no long-term security without economic development. Today, we are learning a new lesson: in addition to the nexus between security and development, there is a second nexus—this one between security and democracy.

And the essence of our democratic vision of security is this: there is no contradiction between our Western values and our strategic interests. They are essential to each other. This applies equally to makers of foreign policy and to men in uniform; to the United States and to any nation in Latin America. We are only able to defend democracy, and we are only worthy of defending it, when we respect and honor its basic principles: the dignity of the individual and the protection of his God-given rights. By joining ranks in the struggle for democracy, we will put ourselves and our people in a position to achieve the hemisphere's highest aspirations. ■

Published by the United States Department of State • Bureau of Public Affairs
Office of Public Communication • Editorial Division • Washington, D.C. • June 1986
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